

Why Plotinus? Late ancient Platonists on the legacy of Plotinus

Jan Opsomer

1. Introduction

Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 1.1, 6.16-7.8: Τούτους δὴ τοὺς τῆς Πλατωνικῆς ἐποπτείας ἐξηγητὰς καὶ τὰς παναγεστάτας ἡμῖν περὶ τῶν θείων ὑφηγήσεις ἀναπλώσαντας καὶ τῷ σφετέρῳ καθηγεμόνι παραπλησίαν τὴν φύσιν λαχόντας εἶναι θεῖην ἂν ἔγωγε **(A) Πλωτῖνόν τε τὸν Αἰγύπτιον (B)** καὶ τοὺς ἀπὸ τούτου παραδεξαμένους τὴν θεωρίαν, **Ἀμέλιόν τε καὶ Πορφύριον, (C)** καὶ τρίτους οἶμαι τοὺς ἀπὸ τούτων ὥσπερ ἀνδριάντας ἡμῖν ἀποτελεσθέντας, **Ἰάμβλιχόν τε καὶ Θεόδωρον, (D)** καὶ εἰ δὴ **τινες ἄλλοι μετὰ τούτους** ἐπόμενοι τῷ θεῷ τούτῳ χορῶ περὶ τῶν τοῦ Πλάτωνος τὴν ἑαυτῶν διάνοιαν ἀνεβάκχευσαν, **(E)** παρ' ὧν τὸ γνησιώτατον καὶ καθαρώτατον τῆς ἀληθείας φῶς τοῖς τῆς ψυχῆς κόλποις ἀχράντως ὑποδεξάμενος ὁ μετὰ θεοὺς ἡμῖν τῶν καλῶν πάντων καὶ ἀγαθῶν **ἡγεμών**, τῆς τε ἄλλης ἀπάσης ἡμᾶς μετόχους κατέστησε τοῦ Πλάτωνος φιλοσοφίας καὶ κοινωνοὺς ὧν ἐν ἀπορρήτοις παρὰ τῶν αὐτοῦ πρεσβυτέρων μετέλθε, καὶ δὴ καὶ τῆς περὶ τῶν θείων μυστικῆς ἀληθείας συγχορευτὰς ἀπέφηνε.

2. First case, the division of the soul in *Tim.* 35b4-6

Tim. 35b4-6: First he took a single portion from all of it. And after this he took a second that was twice the first, then once again he took a third which was one and one half times the second, but three times the first. (μίαν ἀφεῖλεν τὸ πρῶτον ἀπὸ παντὸς μοῖραν, μετὰ δὲ ταύτην ἀφήρει διπλασίαν ταύτης, τὴν δ' αὖ τρίτην ἡμιολίαν μὲν τῆς δευτέρας, τριπλασίαν δὲ τῆς πρώτης, trans. D. Baltzly)

The series: 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 8, 27

Proclus in *Tim.* III, 2.212.3-224.3

A. Introduction (III, 2.212.3-15): in addition to a mathematical explanation, we need a physical and philosophical interpretation. Difficulty of the matter.

“The differences of opinion among the exegetes is obvious, and the objections that more recent interpreters make to the more ancient ones prove the difficulty of looking into such matters.” (δηλοῖ δὲ ἡ τῶν ἐξηγητῶν διαφωνία, καὶ αἱ τῶν δευτέρων ἐνστάσεις πρὸς τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους τὴν χαλεπότητα τῆς τοιαύτης θεωρίας ἐλέγχουσιν, 2.212.12-15)

B. Anonymous mistaken interpretations (astronomical) (212.15-213.7)

The seven terms, which are analogous to the musical scale, are to be related to

(οἱ μὲν...)	the seven heavenly spheres
(οἱ δέ...)	the distances of the spheres to the centre of the earth
(οἱ δέ...)	the motions of the heavenly bodies
(οἱ δέ...)	the sizes of the heavenly bodies
(οἱ δέ...)	the speed of the circles
(οἱ δέ...)	“other explanations of this sort”

Objections:

- These explanations conflict with recent astronomical observations. Cf. Macr. Comm. in *Somn. Scip.* 2.3.13-15 (*quae tamen Archimedis dimensio a Platonis repudiata est, quasi dupla et tripla intervalla non servans. ... Hanc Platonis persuasionem Porphyrius libris inseruit quibus Timaei obscuritatibus non nihil lucis infudit, atque eos credere ad imaginem contextionis animae haec esse in corpore mundi intervalla ...*)
- „Plato nowhere defines either the magnitude, or the distance, or the time [interval], or the motion of the stars.“
- The passage is about the generation of the soul, not of the cosmos.

C. Interpretations that are closer to the truth (213.8-218.20)

“After these people, there is yet another crowd of interpreters who hold views that are more in keeping with the facts.” (Μετὰ δὴ τούτους ἄλλο πλῆθος ἐστὶν ἐξηγητῶν πραγματειωδεστέρων λόγων ἀντεχόμενον, 213.8-9)

C1. Amelius (2.213.9-214.4)

“Amelius pretends not to lay claim to a view which he attributes to Plotinus in his unwritten teachings since it had been sufficiently refuted by those who came after him. His view [Baltzly: ‘This view’] attempts to interpret the text at hand in a different way.” (Ἀμέλιος μὲν γὰρ ἦν εἰς Πλωτῖνον ἀναπέμπει θεωρίαν ὡς ἐν ἀγράφοις συνουσίαις παραδεδομένην, ὑπὸ τῶν μετ’ αὐτὸν ἱκανῶς ἐληλεγμένην μὴ προσποιησάμενος, τρόπον ἕτερον ἐξηγεῖσθαι πειρᾶται τοὺς ἐκκειμένους λόγους, 213.9-13)

In virtue of this series of numbers the soul connects, i.e. exercises providence over, inner-cosmic beings:

1	encosmic gods	
2 and 3	daemons	2: their providence over us 3: their reversion
4 and 9	humans	4: inferior humans 9: superior humans
8 and 27	brutes	8: wild animals 27: domestic animals

“Let no one regard it as astounding if the soul is said to be such as to connect gods: this charge was already brought against him by those who came after him. For the term ‘god’ is said in many ways. There is not only the hyperessential [‘hypercosmic’: B.] god and intellect, but there are also the divine souls and the divine bodies. Therefore, the World Soul will be such as to connect these in virtue of its own monadic number encompassing the divine.” (καὶ τοῦτο μὴ θαυμάσωμεν, εἰ θεῶν ἡ ψυχὴ συνεκτικὴ λέγοιτο· τοῦτο γοῦν ἤδη τις αὐτῷ τῶν μετ’ αὐτὸν ἐπήνεγκε· πολλαχῶς γὰρ ὁ θεός, οὐχὶ τὸ ὑπερούσιον μόνον οὐδὲ ὁ νοῦς μόνος, ἀλλὰ καὶ αἱ θεῖαι ψυχαὶ καὶ τὰ θεῖα σώματα· τούτων οὖν ἕστω καὶ ἡ τοῦ παντὸς ψυχὴ συνεκτικὴ κατὰ τὸ ἑαυτῆς μοναδικὸν τὸν ἀριθμὸν περιλαμβάνουσα τὸν θεῖον, 213.16-22)

C2. Porphyry (2.214.4-215.5)

“Since some of those things that were said beforehand were offered in such a remarkable manner, Porphyry built his case that the soul is harmonised and that it fills the cosmos with all the harmonies on the basis of several reasons.” (trans. Baltzly)

“Despite the fact that these things were said beforehand Porphyry built his case ... through many arguments.” (JO, Πορφύριος δὲ θαυμαστόν τινα τρόπον καίτοι τούτων προειρημένων ὅτι μὲν ἡρμოსται ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ ὅτι πάντα τὸν κόσμον ἁρμονίας πληροῖ, διὰ πολλῶν κατεσκεύασεν)

- Porphyry’s case: the soul is harmonised and fills the cosmos with harmonies.
 - Argument 1: If the soul is a plurality, it has to be harmonised.
 - Argument 2: All the things in the world are guided by harmonic ratios.
- But Porphyry fails to explain how these ratios are defined with respect to the soul’s own essence.

“But how these ratios are defined in terms of the soul’s very hypostasis, he neither teaches us nor sees fit to attend to.” (13-15)

- “But the essence of the soul has been declared to have these harmonic ratios in itself – not as images of other things, nor as first principles of something else – but as something that binds together the plurality of powers in it.” (15-17)
- Proclus himself syllogises that the soul is harmonised in accordance with the diatonic genus.
- Proclus himself adds that the harmony of the soul is the image of ‘certain divine things’.

“These things that Porphyry says at least afford us the opportunity to draw some true conclusion about the soul.” (215.4-5)

C3. The divine Iamblichus (215.5-29)

“The divine Iamblichus celebrates these numbers with all his power as things with the causal efficacy to bring about certain wondrous properties, ...” (5-7)

- [Theology of numbers:] Twice the triad remaining-procession-reversion, at the levels I-III (1-2-3) for simple realities and at the levels V-VII (9-8-27) for composite realities.
- In the middle, level IV, is the number 4, which is truly ‘panharmonic’ by encompassing all the ratios and announcing the second stage (i.e. levels V-VII).
- Explains how the second triad reflects the first, because 9 has an inner connection to 1, just as 8 to 2, and 27 to 3.
- “These are symbols of divine and ineffable things.” (ταῦτα δὲ σύμβολα θεῶν ἐστὶ καὶ ἀπορρήτων πραγμάτων, 28-29)

C4. Theodorus (of Asine) the philosopher (215.19-218.20)

- “Well then, following on this doctrine so wondrous ... the philosopher Theodore going through a line of argument peculiar to himself”
- Th. distinguishes
 1. The Fontal Soul or Soul Itself: indivisible
 2. The universal soul: divided in terms of universals (wholes, καθ’ ὅλα διηρημένην) and harmonised
 3. The world soul: has various divisions (παντοίας ἔχουσιν διαιρέσεις), given shape through lines and circles.
- Th. connects the seven numbers with the universal division.
- The heavens derive from the row of double multiples, the sublunary from the row of triple multiples.
- Numerology of the elements.
- “From a mathematical point of view what has been said is not without a certain level of sophistication. But how it compares with the facts which are the subject matter of our discourses or how one might interpret this in a Pythagorean manner, nothing is said by Theodore that would allow a diligent interpreter to be satisfied.” (218.8-12: ταῦτα δὲ μαθηματικῶς μὲν λεγόμενα φέρει τινὰ θεωρίαν οὐκ ἄμουςον· ὅπως δὲ ἀπείκασται τοῖς πράγμασιν, ὑπὲρ ὧν οἱ λόγοι, καὶ ὅπως ἂν τις αὐτὰ Πυθαγορικῶς διερμηνεύσειεν, οὐδὲν λέγεται παρ’ αὐτῷ τὸν γε μὴ παρέργως ἀκροώμενον ἀποπιμπλάναι δυνάμενον.)

D. Our teacher [Syrianus] (218.20-224.3)

- “After this, let us turn to another mode of reasoning – one which our teacher adopted, not just on this matter, but one that he used in many circumstances with us and which

generated wonderful conceptions as a result, and which we have ourselves deployed earlier.” (218.20-24)

- Syrianus gives a complete and correct interpretation, that deals with all aspects, whereas the predecessors made mistake and gave partial interpretations.
 - Each portion to be taken in a double way: in relation to the whole of the soul, and in terms of the plurality of *logoi* in it.
 - In terms of the whole: three processions (even numbers) and three reversions (odd numbers) with respect to the single and unified *stasis* of the soul: the procession and reversion of that which is without shape or figure; the one of that which has been primarily configured [the receptacle and the spherical world in it], and the procession and reversion of that which has been configured in a secondary manner.
 - In terms of the plurality in it: different types of ratios and means, the geometric proportion being primordial.
 - The soul imitates the first principles: explained.
 - Interpretation of all the details of the text: “Now, in terms of these ideas we will be able to interpret the words of Plato, and by looking to them we will be able to resolve many of the puzzles.” (κατὰ δὴ ταύτας τὰς ἐπιβολὰς καὶ τὰ ῥήματα τοῦ Πλάτωνος ἀφερμηνεύειν ἕκαστα δυνησόμεθα, καὶ πρὸς ταύτας βλέποντες πολλὰ τῶν ἀπόρων διαλύσομεν, 221.24-26)

3. Second case, Proclus’ doxographic report on the demiurge (*in Tim. II, 1.308.16-309.13*)

“The maker and father of this universe it is a hard task to find, and having found him, it would be impossible to declare him to everyone.” (*Tim. 28C3-5*)

Numenius

three gods (father-child-grandchild)
 1. the father (demiurge), the good,
 2. the maker (demiurge) second intellect
 3. the world
 twofold demiurge (i.e.: 1. the father; 2. the maker)

Harpocration

- follower of Numenius, but “confused”
- three gods (father-child-grandchild) & twofold demiurge

Atticus

the demiurge is the good, the highest god

Plotinus

- “After these men comes Plotinus the philosopher, who assumes that the demiurge is double ...” (*in Tim. II, 1.305.16-17*, μετὰ δὴ τούτους τοὺς ἄνδρας Πλωτῖνος ὁ φιλόσοφος διττὸν μὲν ὑποτίθεται τὸν δημιουργόν. trans. D. Runia – M. Share)
- twofold demiurge:
 - the demiurge in the intelligible realm
 - the (en)cosmic intellect. Aristotle’s first principle, *heimarmenê*, Zeus

Amelius

- a threefold demiurge, namely three intellects or kings, “the one who is, the one who has, the one who sees”. Cf. *Tim. 39E7-9; Ep. II.*

Porphyry:

- “After Amelius, we come to Porphyry. Thinking that he is in agreement with Plotinus, he calls the soul the hypercosmic Demiurge on the one hand and its Intellect, to which it has turned, the Living-Thing-Itself on the other, so that in his

view the Paradigm of the Demiurge is the Intellect. It is worth asking him in which text Plotinus makes the soul a demiurge. And how does he think this is consonant with Plato ...” (μετὰ δὴ τὸν Ἀμέλιον ὁ Πορφύριος οἰόμενος τῷ Πλωτίνῳ συνάδειν, τὴν μὲν ψυχὴν τὴν ὑπερκόσμιον ἀποκαλεῖ δημιουργόν, τὸν δὲ νοῦν αὐτῆς, πρὸς ὃν ἐπέστραπται, τὸ αὐτοζῶν, ὡς εἶναι τὸ παράδειγμα τοῦ δημιουργοῦ κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν νοῦν. ὃν ἐρωτᾷ ἄξιον, ἐν τίσι Πλωτίνος τὴν ψυχὴν ποιεῖ δημιουργόν. πῶς δὲ καὶ τῷ Πλάτῳ τοῦτο σύμφωνον, 306.32-307.5)

- *Proclus' objections*: Plotinus does not consider the soul to be an intellect. Plato defines the demiurge as an intellect and a god.

The Divine Iamblichus

- “But after this we come to the divine Iamblichus, who wrote at great length against the opinion of Porphyry, condemning it as not being Plotinian (ἀλλὰ δὴ μετὰ τοῦτον ὁ θεῖος Ἰάμβλιχος πολλὰ μὲν ἀντιγράψας πρὸς τὴν Πορφυρίου δόξαν καὶ ὡς «μὴ» Πλωτίνειον αὐτὴν οὔσαν καταβαλὼν). But as for his own teaching, in his doctrine of the gods he names the entire Intelligible cosmos as the Demiurge, as is clear at least from his own words, in which he expresses himself in the same terms as Plotinus. He declares at any rate in his Commentaries as follows: ...” (II, 1.307.14-20)
 - The intelligible kosmos is the demiurge, as is the teaching of Plotinus.
 - Iamblichus condemns Porphyry's view as not being in agreement with Plotinus.
- Proclus cites the text and offers two interpretations: “These are his words. If through them he indicates that in the Demiurge all things exist in a demiurgic mode, including Being itself and the Intelligible cosmos, he will agree both with his own philosophy and with Orpheus, who says ... But if he thinks that the Demiurge represents the entire level in between the cosmos and the One, it is worth raising some difficulties, and we shall oppose his account on the basis of what he himself has taught us.” (307.25-308.9)
- Proclus cites a second text, from another work, exhibiting an interpretation that is apparently in fundamental agreement with Proclus' own view.

Syrianus / Proclus